

File #

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(The following article appeared in the Anniversary issue of the Duxbury Clipper, May 31, 1990. — Ed.)

A Day in the Life of a Teenager...in 1918

By THE REV. CANON
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Rising time was always 6 am, 7 days a week, rain or shine — winter or summer. The first job was to build a fire in the kitchen stove from kindling piled in the woodbox the night before. Then a large saucepan (enough for 10 persons) was filled and a proper amount of oatmeal set to cook. This was slow going as the wood fire took time to heat up to cooking temperature. While this was under way, I would go to the barn and water and feed the horses. I would climb the barn stairs and pour the oats and corn down the chutes into the mangers with a couple of forksful of hay from the loft nearby. Horses are very intelligent animals, so watering consisted simply of unhooking the rope that penned them in the stall and letting them out to help themselves.

Now it was time to return to the house where the rest of the family would have a full breakfast under way. Electric toasters were unheard of and canned juices had not yet appeared so we had to squeeze the juice from fresh oranges and warm the bread in the oven. Usually bacon and eggs and sausage and milk made up the rest of the menu. What we today call hashed brown potatoes, i.e., fried, were a frequent addition to the meal. On weekends baked beans furnished a nourishing supplement as well.

My father then excused himself and going to the barn, he would roll the meat wagons around down a slight incline to the staging area next to the basement meat market that constituted the northern half of our cellar area. Hired men would now arrive and load the meat carts for their daily rounds in which trips were made to Powder Point and the Village on one set of days and to South Duxbury and Island Creek on others. Customers had large colored cards they would place in a window facing the street to show a desire for the meat wagon to stop. Cards were used in this way for ice, groceries, and milk so peddlers would know when to stop. A Saturday task for us was scrubbing out these meat carts so they would be fresh and clean for the following week's deliveries.

Meanwhile, preparations were under way upstairs for lunches to carry to school. These were mostly sandwiches made from thick and heavy but very nourishing bread. Monday sandwiches were frequently made of baked beans served for dinner Saturday night as well as Sunday morning breakfast. Anyone who has eaten a baked bean sandwich with molasses and mustard flavor can never forget it. As with oatmeal, it had to have the quality we used to call "sticking to the ribs."

I pause now to describe the making of "home-baked bread." Of course no one ever heard of "store-bought" bread; every family made their own supply usually on

Duxbury Clipper, Wednesday, June 26, 1996

Saturday. When I think of the labor that women had to put out to run a household in these days, I am simply appalled. The preparing of meals, long-range planning for food preparation, making and repairing of clothes — all done by the mother of the family not including sudden demands like sickness requiring hours of bedside nursing, if the family size was 5 children as was the custom, this looking back seems really impossible.

Making batter for the bread was my specialty on Friday nights because there was no homework for the next day. I spell this out in some detail to explain how very different that age was from this, in which frozen foods (prepared for eating in minutes), canned vegetables, and soups (now just as tasty as what we can put up in jars from our own garden produce), have made kitchen life so different.

First, mother would get the 10-quart bucket out from under the sink and attach the kneading mechanism, which consisted of a flat strip of metal placed across the top of the bucket — a curved metal rod that went down the length of the container and a long handle with a knob at the end with which to grind. Now with a small bag of flour at hand, mother would pour the flour in cupful by cupful alternating with tablespoonsful of liquid yeast while I ground until the whole reached the size of a football. This was then placed beside the stove with a towel over it to rise overnight and fill the entire pail, often to overflowing. Then the dough would be gathered into neat lumps, placed in bread pans and smeared on top with butter and placed beside the crock of baked beans which, having been soaked all Friday night, would be baked in the oven most of the next morning.

Having now packed the sandwiches we were off to the school.

We always had to walk, for no one would think of harnessing and hitching a horse to take us there. These morning walks we were told were good for us, but they sometimes were rather difficult, especially the 2-mile walk to Partridge Academy up Harrison St. where the winter winds penetrated even the thickest clothing — including longjohns. My sister remembers skipping across the ice cakes on Blue Fish River rather than using the strong stone bridge. It was a break in the routine and dangerous enough to furnish some excitement.

Once at school, I enjoyed myself thoroughly. I loved my teachers, as I had periodic crushes on some, and I loved testing my mind and filling my heart with the great stories of our heritage. We had a kind of awe of our teachers at this time, knowing they were messengers of special meaning for our futures. My greatest subject was English literature and grammar, especially the latter. I was fascinated by the way language had become possible in the human race and the correct formulation of sentences to convey subtle shades of meaning. A favorite text at the time that was required reading for us was George Herbert Palmers' *Self Cultivation in English*, which began with the line... "Good English is exact English; a man's words must fit his thoughts like a glove."

Since there were no organized sports most of the students spent their lunch time, after eating at their desks, playing "catch" or setting up a volley ball game while I sneaked into a back closet and dug through trashed books to read during all this time. I was the proverbial bookworm. I would finish my sandwich early so I could stick my nose in some cast-off tattered volume of romance or poetry. To most of my generation, learning was an adventure and school presented a capital opportunity to accept it as such. I am sad to say that my enthusiasm for learning did not extend to mathematics. Our math teacher gave up on me and turned me over the school principal, George Greene. Mr. Greene tutored me in several frustrating afterschool sessions. After 3 of these he put down his chalk with which he was trying to illustrate some trigonometry items, came forward and sat down on the desk. He then said, "Bob Merry, I've told Harvard admissions people you were well qualified for entrance, and I'll stand by that if I have to spend more hours on your mathematics, but I'll do this only on the condition that you promise me that you will never ever take any courses in mathematics again. It simply is not in you and it is no use trying to drag it out.

George Greene had only recently been mustered out of the army and he was obsessed with the discipline that army life provided. This he sought to instill into his students, lacking any other kind of physical education. Parents were generally in favor of a minimal physical training because they generally felt that with the extensive chores at home for both girls and boys that was all that was required for growing adolescents. Military drills, platoon formations along with school organization was required and seemed to be sufficient.

When sports began with a winning basketball team, the first to be activated, (we won most of our games because our 6-footers, Ernest and Wadsworth, overwhelmed the opposition), it was with equipment we students will be able to cope with a world overwhelming in its sensory data. Emphasis of education today is not on amassing jewels of the past, although some of these are included, but on analyzing and dealing with the demands of the present. There is also a global dimension to today's education entirely lacking in my day.

This applies especially to value systems. In my day there were certain standards of behavior and morality in general that one violated at one's peril. Today value systems are pragmatic, rather than codified into rules. This is not to pass judgment; it is impossible to say one method of education is better than another. Each is the expression of a response to the demands of the existing culture. Human morals have a way of continuing with minor fluctuations without extremes. This is why it is pointless for one generation to judge another, as such judgment must be based on the demands and responses of each separate generation. People express dissatisfaction with public education today often because they are judging it from the perspective of their own generation. I for example deplore the fact that as I perceive it children don't memorize or spell the way we used to do. Perhaps that is because this day demands a critical mind more than one stuffed with information that may or may not be useful in today's space age.

After returning home in the afternoon I had many chores to do. One daily job was cleaning out the horses' stalls, heaving waste down a trap door where pigs would give it another working over, and laying straw obtained from the town's marshes on the bottom of the stalls. Usually returning meat wagons after the day's run would

be cleaned and put away by hired men. They would also feed and water the horses and lock them in for the night. The biggest daily afternoon task was chopping the kindling and other wood for cooking and heating especially in winter. Later on, rigs for cutting wood consisted of a 2-cycle engine with a wide leather belt attached to a circular saw. This contraption hauled from house to house in the fall was a tremendous help. Also we had an old retired man who would come by and spend all day sawing wood by hand with a buck saw for his lunch and a dollar.

Evenings were spent on homework. Quite often this was done in the sitting room that contained a parlor-type stove which would be lighted for the evening. The major source of heat in the house at this time was the kitchen stove. There was a kerosene space heater for the bathroom upstairs and it was like running a gauntlet to get from one warm section of the house to another. Bedrooms were unheated but the beds were rendered habitable by the use of bricks set on the kitchen stove after dinner and wrapped up in newspapers and tucked into the bottom of the beds. I can remember well tucking my feet into an icy bed and reaching them down to the comforting heat of these bricks.

The tasks of the girls of the family was helping mother prepare dinner and then washing the dishes afterwards which after feeding 10 people could be a formidable task.

In my growing days life was tightly structured especially in the division of male and female roles. Women had control of the house, the feeding and clothing of the family, and men had all the work outside. As soon as I stepped across the threshold of the kitchen door, my responsibilities ceased except for providing wood for heating and cooking and the general operation of the plumbing and house structure, (e.g., if a ceiling fell down it was a male task to replace it or if the doorstep broke). Some girls chafed at this conventional division of labor and insisted on doing some of the male duties, but they were few and were quickly branded "tomboys" and shunned by their peers.

Things are vastly different today where all roles are open to everyone. Girls today are brought up with the belief that they can do anything boys can do. In families where both parents work full-time jobs, as in the case of all my 3 married children, this is the way it has to be. For a "traditionalist" today's households look like controlled riots, with children and parents all doing "their own thing." But as I have observed these children brought up without strict norms of behavior, they seem to come through to maturity with sensitivities far and away greater than in my day. In my day, much time was spent in "keeping the lid on", i.e., insisting an outward conformity to a set of abstract principles. A favorite ad at this time for paint read, "Save the surface and you save all." Meanwhile under the surface and adhering to "principles" allowed untold numbers of abuses to propagate. I welcome this generation's impatience with this kind of moral indifference.

A day in the life of a teenager "In the teens" changed when school was out for the summer and when native people turned to serving the "summer people." The native folk made enough money to survive the other 10 months of the year. Duxbury has changed from a summer resort to a "commuter's town" and a day in the life of a teenager today would reflect this difference as well as those listed above, but in any case it would be an appreciative life, sharing this jewel of human habitation.

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